

From the Announcer, First Baptist Church, Hamilton NY, May 2006

“ALL FLESH!”

...a pastoral word in anticipation of Pentecost Sunday, June 4

According to Luke (Acts 1), the last thing Jesus says to his followers is, “*Stay here in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.*” And that’s what they do—they wait, together, in someone’s house. Since they don’t have a clue what this power might look like, we suspect the windows are up and the doors open so that whatever this “power from on high” is, it might come in.

And this power turns out to be far greater than anything they might have expected. When it comes, it starts with a sound like the rushing of wind. Then it bursts into something like flames of fire above their heads. And then the Holy Spirit moves in, filling up everyone there.

Well, when folks on the street, from all over the world who have come to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, hear all this ruckus they rush up to see what’s going on. “Is everyone okay?” they ask. And as the disciples try to tell them they are—that it’s just God’s Spirit doing the Spirit’s thing—to everyone’s amazement they’re speaking in languages none of them had ever spoken before. People from everywhere hear these Galileans speaking their own language.

And just as everyone starts to conclude that drunkenness is the only explanation for this bizarre behavior, Peter opens his mouth. What comes out is an old prophecy from Joel: “*In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all people.*”

Hmm. What does it mean that God will pour out God’s Spirit on *all people*? What does “*all people*” mean? Well, after years of intense theological study, and a number of framed and impressive pieces of paper on my study wall to show for it, I conclude that it means—*all people*! Not simply chosen people, or wealthy people, or ordained people, or male people, or educated people, or good people (however you would define that)—but *all people*.

I’m constantly amazed, saddened even, whenever any of our Christian brothers and sisters just don’t get this. It’s right here—in black and white. Peter’s recall of this prophecy suggests that a sure sign of God’s fiery transforming Spirit is when it is set loose on everyone and not just a few. And it is the church’s job to fan those flames wherever they may be found.

And Peter, quoting Joel, goes on to say that when the Spirit comes upon folk, they’ll have something to say—sons and daughters will preach, young men and old will see dreams. Even slaves, that is those denied voice, will speak. And that’s exactly what happens, beginning with Peter. Uneducated Peter—brash, boastful, denying, cowardly Peter—begins to preach. And what does he preach? Why, Jesus, of course. Whether or not it is the best sermon ever preached, it seems to be one of the most effective. It only lasted about three minutes; but we’re told that what he said cut those listening on “to the heart” and about three thousand people were saved that day.

Yes, when the Spirit comes, not only can it come on anyone, but it comes so that one will have something to say. And, you don’t have to wear a robe or stand in a pulpit. Pentecost is not about calling the minister to tell him or her that you know of someone hurting, lost, wandering and in need. It’s about every one of us having something to say to people who need a word of grace. And even though we may not have a clue of what to say, the Spirit descends and gives us the power and the words to speak. Everybody gets to speak up for God, because church is the place where the power belongs, not just to a few, but to all!

This is what the church does. We translate, with the Spirit as our tutor, the message of God’s love into language people can understand—a language of love, grace and mercy, gentleness and care.

“All flesh” it says! Who does that leave out? Not me, not you. Young and old, male and female, slave and free—the Spirit turns everybody into a preacher! It’s true—an absolutely sure sign that the Spirit is among us is the clear communication of the gospel, in deeds and in words, across all human divides.

Now one last thing. Please pay attention—this is important. Most churches are content and satisfied just so ministry, work and witness is being done—even though only a few folks actually are doing it. But doesn’t *“all flesh”* seem to imply full participation by the body? So, here’s what I want to ask: who’s doing the ministry, work and witness here at First Baptist?

When I look around our church I see a sweet spirit and a wonderful fellowship with great things happening. But I have to confess that I see the same few committed people doing most of the work—the same faces, again and again, in Bible study, teaching Sunday School, learning about missions, volunteering to serve in some ministry project. For most of us, attending Sunday worship seems to be enough. So, while the level of activity may give the impression of spiritual vitality and faithfulness, the reality of a relative few really serving should make us stop and consider.

“All flesh” it says! I wonder, does that include me? How about you?